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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a program to measure institutional effectiveness that involved development of an inventory checklist designed to stimulate faculty input on how student performance-related outcomes are measured and to evaluate current program effectiveness. The checklist, designed to be administered in an interview format, focused on three particular areas: (1) departmental mission, intended educational outcomes, and written methods of assessment for evaluating program effectiveness; (2) direct indicators for assessing students' knowledge and skills, including capstone courses, portfolio assessments, licensure, certification, professional exams; and indirect indicators for assessing students' and others' opinions of their learning, including student course evaluations, employer surveys, student exit interviews, and alumni surveys; and (3) using inventory results to identify needed program improvements and additional resources such as training, personnel, and technology. The paper concludes that using the inventory checklist provides a non-threatening way to assess student outcomes, and offers an excellent opportunity for initiating a systematic and continuing process for institutional effectiveness and educational improvement. The checklist is appended. (Contains 12 references.) (CH)

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Finding the 'Start Line' with an Institutional Effectiveness Inventory

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Finding the 'Start Line' with an Institutional Effectiveness Inventory

Although the assessment movement is approaching the quarter-century mark, there are still outposts where the use of student performance-related outcomes has not entered the mainstream of institutional life. In order to open the conversation on assessment, we designed a checklist to inventory current campus practices. The checklist, designed to be administered in an interview format, gathered information on intended educational outcomes, existing and potential assessment techniques and instruments. Results from the inventories were assembled into a diagnostic profile that identified resources, needs, and areas where centrally directed assessment activities would benefit all departments and programs.

It has been nearly a quarter of a century since assessment began as a way for a college or university to measure its impact on students. Instead of focusing on inputs and resources, assessment looks critically at student learning, articulating program goals, setting standards for accomplishment, and measuring the extent to which standards are met. The question, "What should our graduates know, be able to do, and value?" is the focal point for beginning an assessment effort where outcomes matter most.

The mandate for assessment developed as various national commissions studying higher education concluded that a "disturbing and dangerous mismatch exists between what American society needs from higher education and what it is receiving." (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). What began as an experimental response to those concerns on the part of a handful of institutions has developed into a national agenda. For the past 15 years, there has been relentless pressure for assessment and the expectations associated with it (Gray, 1997).

Influences on student assessment have been exerted by national-level efforts, state-level initiatives, accreditation agencies, the private sector and professional associations. All six regional accrediting agencies now require evidence of student assessment. According to a recent survey, all but four of fifty states reported some type of student assessment, and the requirement to demonstrate effectiveness via student outcomes has become part of performance funding in a number of states (Ewell, 1996; Cole, Nettles & Sharp, 1997; Peterson and Einarson, 2000). Regardless of who guides the effort to strengthen institutional accountability, it appears inevitable that student

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assisted with data analysis for this paper.

outcomes assessment will endure as a topic of institutional, regional and national concern into the 21st century.

Conceptual Framework

Like many institutions, our impetus for instituting a program of institutional effectiveness was an impending regional accreditation visit. Undertaking assessment in at atmosphere where many faculty are unfamiliar with the concept is a challenge, particularly at a large, diffuse university where colleges are independent and faculty in a single discipline may be scattered across several campuses. In order to lay the groundwork for an initiative that is certain to claim a fair amount of time and resources over the next several years, we decided to begin by polling departments on their existing assessment activities. We chose to develop an inventory checklist to identify current campus practices for assessing student performance-related outcomes.

The development of an inventory checklist was not a novel idea for such an undertaking. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools encourages its member institutions to begin their evaluation of institutional effectiveness by conducting an assessment of existing practices within the institution, and even suggests a format for the inventory (Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 1996). Nichols (1995) discusses the importance and added value of conducting an inventory of assessment activities. Many of his case study institutions reported the use of an inventory for means of collecting and reporting information (Nichols, 1993). Palomba and Banta (1999) point out that completing an inventory of current data collection methods may uncover several activities that, although not specifically designed

for program assessment, can help accomplish its purpose. Institutions using inventories reported benefits ranging from the identification of disparities in existing operations and programs to using inventory results as benchmarks to measure future assessment efforts (Nichols, 1995; Hodge, 1997).

Administering the Inventory Checklist

The purpose of the inventory checklist was to stimulate conversation and provoke thought among department chairs and their units about ways in which student performance-related outcomes are measured and to evaluate current methods for overall program effectiveness. The inventory checklist identified strengths, weaknesses, and needed resources in individual programs. It highlighted areas in which programs had proven methods of assessment in place, and uncovered methods of assessment not in place but potentially useful. It allowed respondents to determine which methods were not desirable or applicable for program assessment.

The inventory checklist was designed to be administered in an interview setting and with three areas of interest in mind. The first area focused on departmental mission, intended educational outcomes, and written methods of assessment for evaluating program effectiveness. The second area focused on direct and indirect indicators of assessment. Direct indicators assess knowledge and skills demonstrated by the student, such as capstone courses, portfolio assessments, licensure, certification, or professional exams, and video and audiotape evaluations. Indirect indicators assess students' and others' opinions of their learning, such as student course evaluations, employer surveys and questionnaires, student exit interviews, and alumni surveys. The third area focused

on the use of inventory results for overall program improvement, and identification of needed resources such as training, personnel, and technology, for improving student outcomes and program effectiveness.

Prior to the interview, a web search was conducted to identify educational outcomes plans from other institutions that had completed, or were in the process of completing, the SACS reaffirmation Self-Study. At least one educational outcomes plan was printed for each discipline, so that chairs could have a tangible example of assessment work done by their colleagues in other institutions. The plan, along with a copy of the inventory checklist, was provided to each department chair a few days prior to the interview.

The interview consisted of a one-on-one discussion with each department chair. The focus of the interview was to complete the inventory checklist, gather any supporting documentation offered, and ask as many questions as possible about specific outcomes assessment methods used by each department or program. The inventory checklist proved beneficial in gathering information in several ways. First, it stimulated an exchange of information between the department chair and the interviewer regarding specific outcomes assessment methods used by departments and programs. Second, it delineated examples of many different types of outcomes assessment methods, thus encouraging departments and programs to consider assessment in broader, and less strictly quantitative, terms. Third, it brought to realization the fact that some departments and programs were well on their way in identifying formal assessment activities. Likewise, departments or programs lagging in formal assessment activities were

identified. Finally, departments and programs were able to identify and prioritize the areas where programs, services, and operations needed to be improved.

The inventory checklist, coupled with individual interviews, proved to be an effective method for gathering information about individual departments and programs. The interview format was non-threatening, thereby allowing for an open and honest dialogue between the interviewer and the department chair. Department chairs candidly voiced their concerns, fears, and support about the reaffirmation project. Two-way communications between the interviewer and the department chair was not only stimulated, but also encouraged. Each party was given the opportunity to ask questions, not only concerning the department or program, but the reaffirmation project as well.

Administering the checklist to the administrative and academic support units took a slightly different route. Believing that it was impractical and unnecessary to interview each unit director separately, we instead attended scheduled staff meetings in each area and explained the institutional effectiveness cycle, walking the participants through the checklist. We asked for the inventories to be completed and returned to our office within a month. The response rate was good, but the self-report aspect of this collection effort made the results a little less credible, particularly where documentation was not attached to the checklist.

Using the Checklist Results

Information from the completed checklists was first organized onto a spreadsheet to simplify analysis of results (Figure 1). Tallied results indicated that 80% of the departments reported having written mission statements, 43% said that they had

Figure 1. Sample spreadsheet data for compiling checklist results.

College	Business	Business	Business	Business Business
Department	Marketing	School of Accounting	Economics	Finance
Program	Marketing	Accounting	Economics	Finance
Program level	BS	MACC	MAT	BS
Written mission statement?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Intended educational outcomes?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Written methods of assessment?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Separate accreditation?	AACSB	No	AACSB	AACSB
Direct indicators of assessment:				
Comprehensive exam	Currently use	N/A	N/A	Would use
Writing proficiency exam	N/A	Currently use	N/A	N/A
National exam	Would use	N/A	Would use	N/A
GRE subject test	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Certification exam	N/A	Currently use	N/A	N/A
Licensure exam	N/A	Currently use	N/A	N/A
Local pretest-posttest	Would use	N/A	Would use	N/A
Performance assessment	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Video/audio tape evaluation	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Senior thesis/major project	N/A	Currently use	N/A	Currently use
Portfolio evaluation	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Capstone courses	Would use	N/A	N/A	Currently use

articulated intended educational outcomes, and 37% had defined methods of assessment for evaluating program effectiveness in terms of measurable student outcomes. Almost all reported that they had used assessment, however informally obtained, to improve programs.

The ordering of direct measures shown in Figure 2 clarified which indicators were most frequently used across departments. Direct measures are those that require students to display their knowledge and skills as they respond to the measurement itself. Senior projects topped the list of most frequently used direct indicators, followed by the GRE subject tests, capstone courses and comprehensive exams. The "white space" between shaded bars was of special interest, since it points to indicators departments would be

willing to consider making a part of their program assessments. For the most part, white space was scarce for direct indicators; departments were either using the indicator or were not interested in using it. Measures requiring performance rather than testing were slightly more popular. Since fewer than half of the departments were either using or planning to use most direct measures, it became obvious that these measures were going to be a hard sell.

The assessment picture for indirect indicators looked more hopeful (Figure 3). Indirect measures ask students, or those connected with them, to reflect on their learning rather than demonstrate it. Aside from course evaluations, which most departments engage in regularly, there was low participation but high interest in using most of the indirect indicators. These generally fell into two categories; those involving analysis of existing data ("Analysis of grade distribution, " "Examination of department data," "Comparison with peer institutions") and those requiring collection of outcomes data on graduates. Having an empirical identification of these departmental needs gave our office the mandate we felt was necessary to proceed with centrally directed assessment activities.

Arraying the indicators by college provided a more detailed diagnosis of assessment activities and needs. For example, Figure 4 illustrates that most departments in the College of Arts and Letters had little interest in direct measures. Although licensure and certification exams are not used in these disciplines, the rejection of almost any kind of direct display of knowledge and skills was disconcerting. More favorable was the interest displayed in using indirect indicators. The patterns within as well as across the columns quickly profiled those departments likely to be cooperative in

Figure 2 Direct indicators of assessment in academic departments

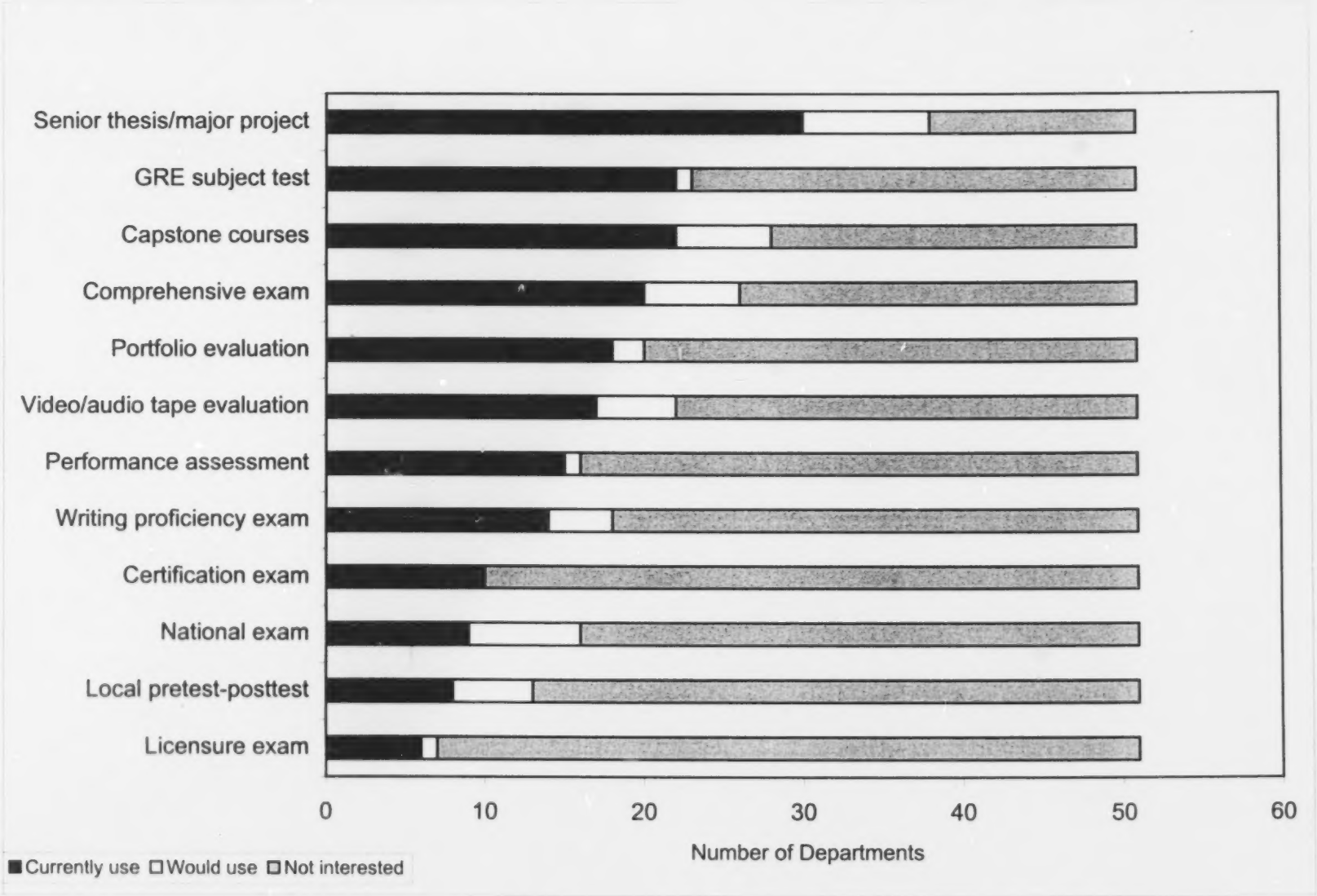
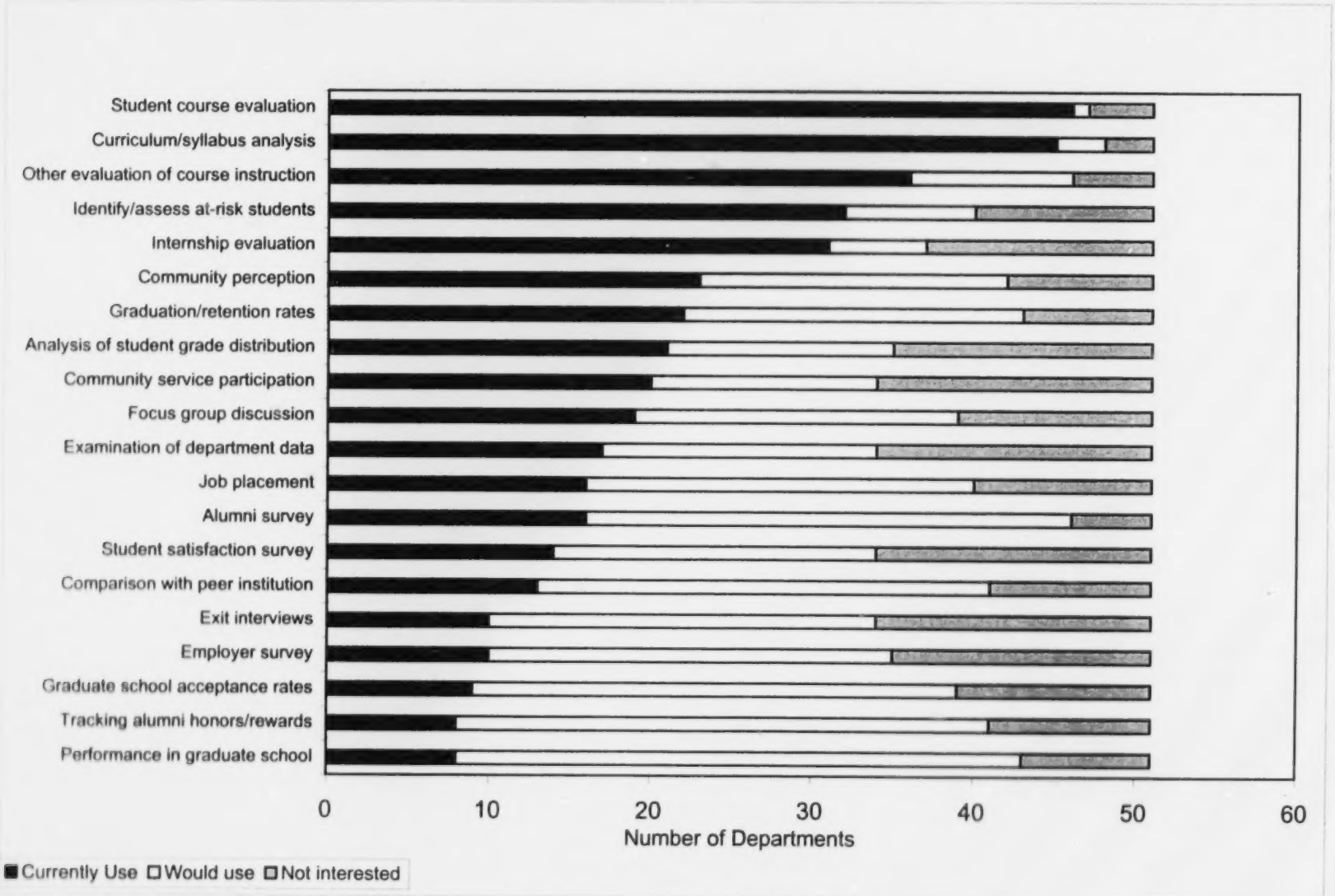


Figure 3 Indirect indicators of assessment in academic departments



assessment (Communications) vs. the probable resisters (Political Science). The contrast of Arts and Letters with the profiled College of Education (Figure 5) is revealing. Education has separate discipline accreditations and is accustomed to demonstrating student outcomes. Their profile identifies them as potential cheerleaders or advocates whose experiences might be used to energize their colleagues in other colleges.

A parallel ordering of assessment indicators for administrative and academic support units showed a number of indicators already in use (Figure 6). The ones generating most interest for future use were measures that could be implemented using a centrally administered client satisfaction survey, and comparisons with peer institutions.

When asked what resources were needed to develop better methods for assessing outcomes, department chairs consistently mentioned financial and human support, training and technology. Assistance with development of instruments and tracking of program graduates was frequently requested. Department chairs also expressed concern over the time required to identify, gather and produce documentation and information supporting departmental efforts for improving student performance-related outcomes. They urged establishment of a timeline delineating tasks, responsible individuals, resources and due dates to ensure that the process stayed on track. They believed that this type of coordinated effort would best be achieved with institution-wide leadership and support from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Analysis.

The inventory checklist analysis led us to the sobering realization that we had far to go before accreditation time. We promptly arranged for outside consultants to conduct a two-day workshop to further acquaint administrators, faculty and staff with the concepts of institutional effectiveness and provide expert guidance for those willing to

Figure 4 Profile of indicators - College of Arts and Letters

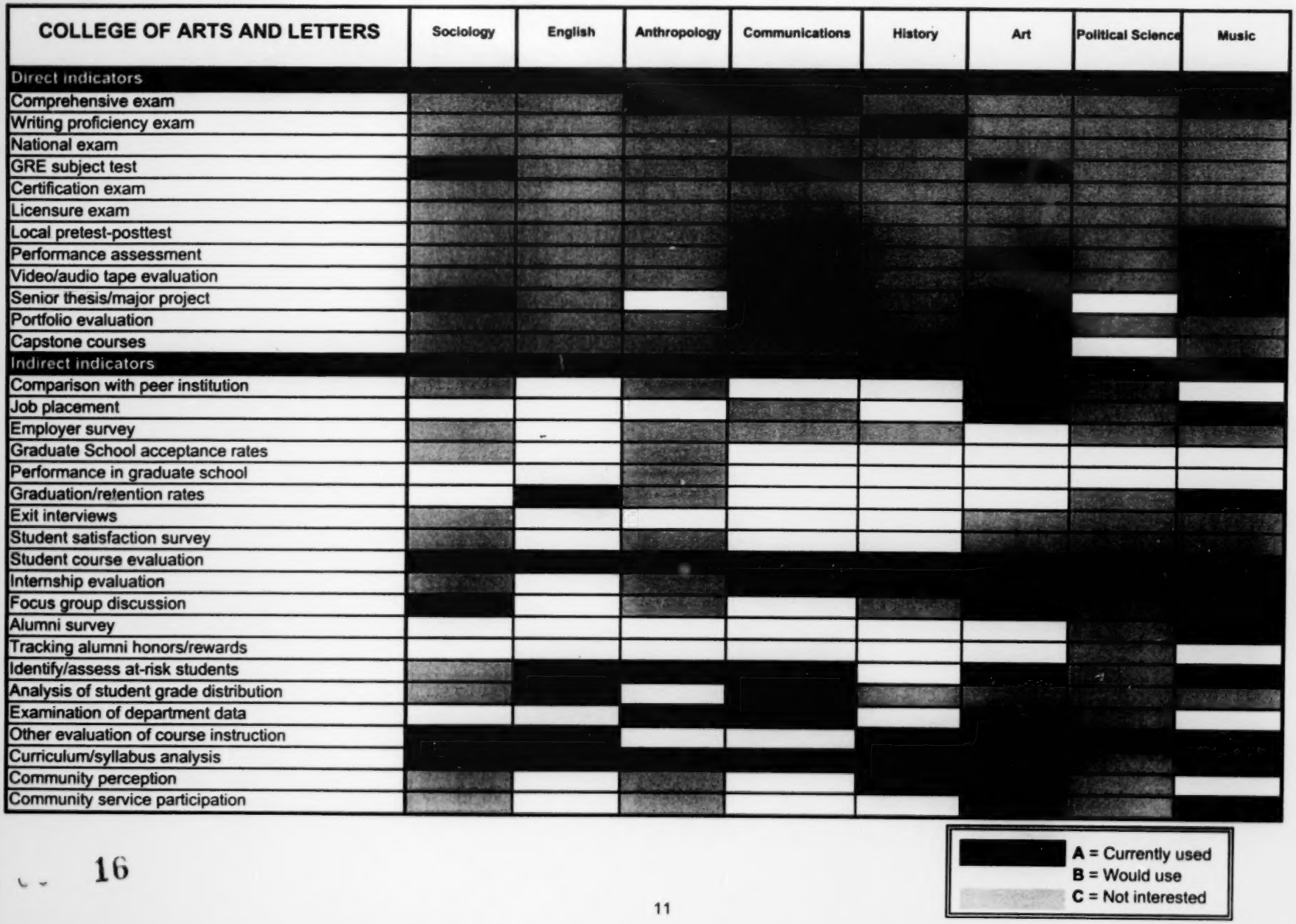


Figure 5

Profile of Indicators - College of Education

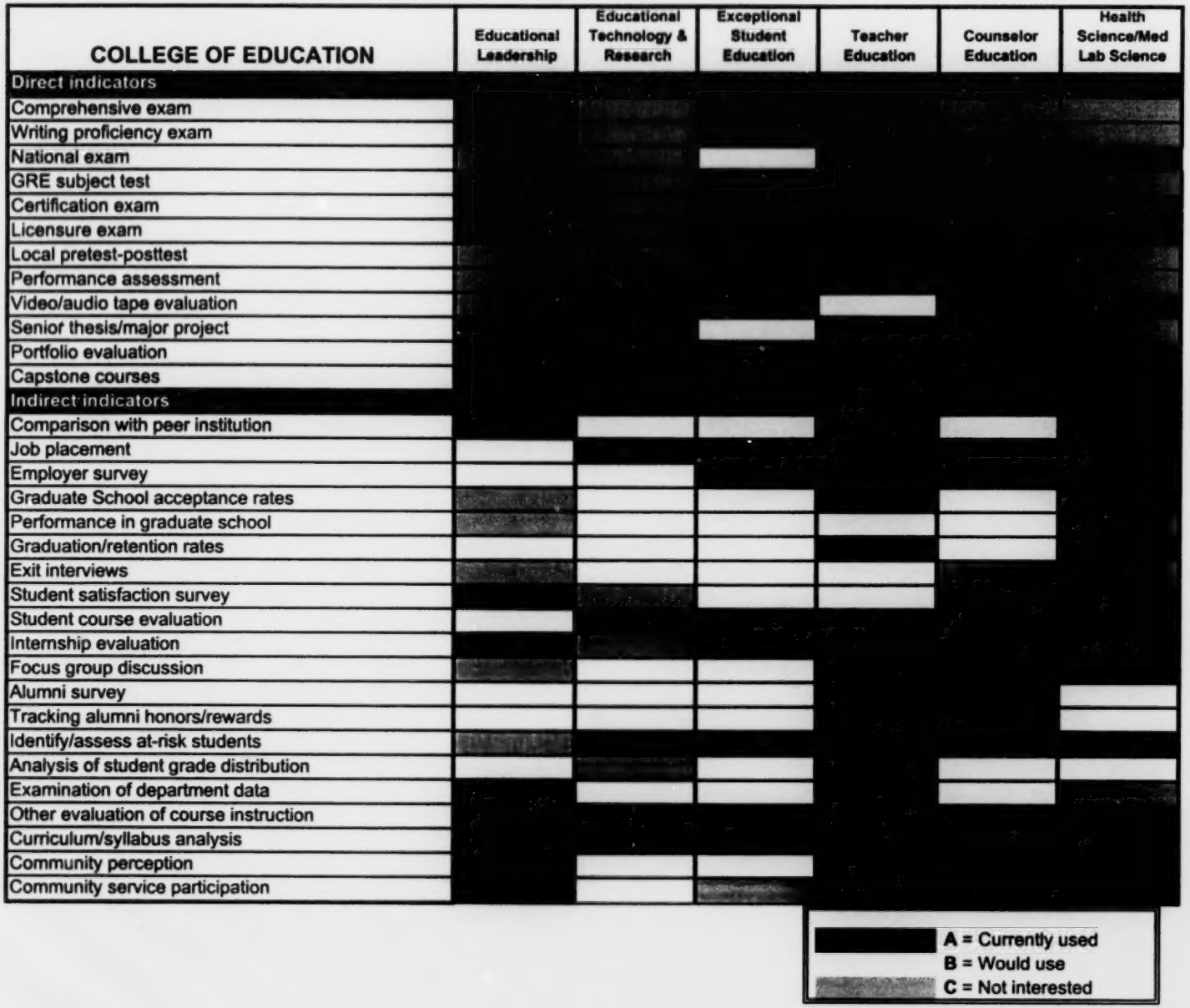
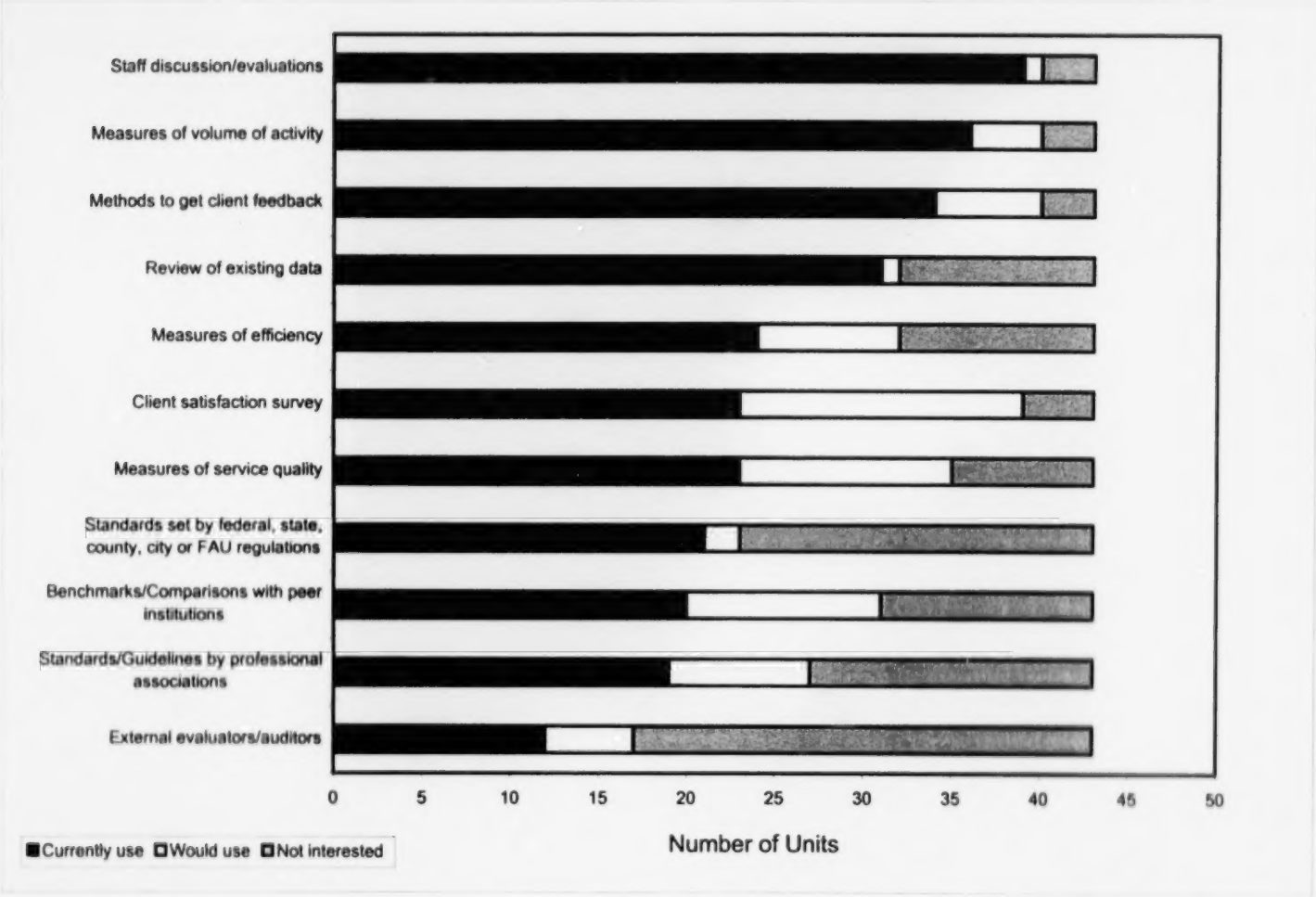


Figure 6 Assessment indicators in administrative and academic support units



get started with their plans. A decision was made to form an Academic Programs Assessment Committee with representation from all colleges to oversee the development of program assessment plans at all degree levels. Since research has shown that the biggest obstacle to implementing student outcomes assessment is faculty resistance (Maki, 1999), there was a strong effort to extend Committee membership to senior faculty with few or no administrative responsibilities. The Committee will recommend approval or modification of the plans to the Provost. The expressed need for technical support to assist departments in instrument identification and data analysis resulted in the funding of a new position for an assessment coordinator. Meanwhile, the SACS Self-Study Committee charged with Institutional Effectiveness reviewed the inventories and prepared an initial report for the administration on the compliance status with Section III of the Criteria. As the process of developing assessment plans proceeded, the checklists served as a baseline for measuring progress.

Conclusion

The assessment of student performance-related outcomes offers an excellent opportunity for initiating a systematic and continuing process for gathering, interpreting, and using information that will result in increasing institutional effectiveness and educational improvement. Although a systematic process for assessing student performance-related outcomes is mandated by accrediting agencies, the initiative can be a catalyst for many positive changes in improving educational outcomes and institutional effectiveness.

For us, the inventory checklist was a way to introduce the concept of student outcomes assessment in a nonthreatening, low-risk, collegial context. It allowed us to

answer questions, allay fears, and confront resistance on an individual basis. Talking in person is particularly useful for those who are new to the process. By reassuring faculty and chairs that many of their existing efforts were already moving in the right direction, we bought goodwill for the project. Reluctant faculty were often pleased to discover that assessment did not necessarily involve only quantitative measurements and did not require standardized testing. Finally, the inventory results got the attention of campus administrators, whose leadership was critical for ensuring that assessment efforts stayed on track.

Two minor limitations of the checklist surfaced during its use. There was some initial confusion over the role this information would play in the Self-Study process. Some chairs were concerned that the information submitted via the checklist would represent their department's final, rather than initial, status with respect to institutional effectiveness and that they would not have an opportunity to update their progress. Second, the examples of direct and indirect measures on the checklist, while comprehensive, were not intended to preclude other kinds of measures that might be devised for program assessment. There was some risk that faculty and administrators would not look beyond these indicators for others that might be more appropriate for their programs.

Successful assessment is more than a collection of techniques, instruments and outcomes; it is a cultural issue that affects how a community of scholars defines its responsibilities to its students (Magruder, McManis & Young, 1997). Now that we've identified the 'Start Line', the goal of transforming the information collected via the inventories into a successful assessment culture seems more attainable.

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INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS CHECKLIST

For Academic Departments

College:: _____

Department: _____

Program (Major): _____

Level: _____

Part I. Does the program listed above have:

1. A written mission or statement of purpose? _____ **Yes** _____ **No**
   If yes, please attach a copy or reference a website and/or catalog for retrieval of this information.

   _____

2. Statements of intended educational outcomes?

   (This term describes what the departmental faculty intend for a student to be able to think, know, or do when they've completed a given educational program.)

   _____ **Yes** _____ **No**

3. Written methods of assessment for evaluating program effectiveness in terms of measurable student outcomes?

   _____ **Yes** _____ **No**

4. A separate accreditation agency or process? _____ **Yes** _____ **No**
   If yes, please list all accreditation agencies.

   _____

   _____

   _____

Part II. Assessment of Outcomes:

During the past year, has your program used any of the following for assessment of outcomes?
Indicate "**A**" if currently being used; "**B**" if not currently being used but interested in using; and "**C**" if not applicable.

***Direct indicators of assessment*:**

1. _____ Comprehensive exams
2. _____ Writing proficiency exams
3. _____ National exams assessing subject matter knowledge (e.g., Major Field Achievement Test)
4. _____ Graduate Record Examination (GRE) subject test
5. _____ Certification exams
6. _____ Licensure exams
7. _____ Locally developed pre-test or post-test for mastery of knowledge
8. _____ Performance assessment for graduating seniors (i.e., recitals, art exhibits, science projects, etc.)
9. _____ Video and audio tape evaluations (i.e., music, art, student teaching, etc.)
10. _____ Senior thesis/major project
11. _____ Portfolio evaluation containing representative examples of student's work (i.e., written, creative, or scientific papers or projects)
12. _____ Capstone courses which are designed to measure student mastery of essential theoretical and methodological issues associated with a discipline (e.g., senior level seminars)

Indirect indicators of assessment:

1. _____ Comparison of outcomes with peer institutions
2. _____ Job placement of graduating students
3. _____ Employer surveys and questionnaires
4. _____ Graduate school acceptance rates
5. _____ Performance in graduate school
6. _____ Student graduation/retention rates
7. _____ Exit interviews
8. _____ Student satisfaction surveys
9. _____ Student course evaluations
10. _____ Internship evaluation
11. _____ Focus group discussions
12. _____ Alumni surveys reporting satisfaction with degree program and career success
13. _____ Tracking of alumni honors, awards, and achievements at local, state, and national levels
14. _____ Identification and assessment of at-risk students
15. _____ Analysis of student grade distributions
16. _____ Examination of information contained in department's own database
17. _____ Other evaluations of course instruction (e.g., chair or peer review)
18. _____ Curriculum/syllabus analysis (e.g., analysis of transfer student preparation)
19. _____ Community perception of program effectiveness
20. _____ Community service/volunteerism participation
21. _____ Other:_____

_____

_____

Part III. Other Information

1. Has your department used any of the indicators listed above to improve departmental programs, services, and operations? _____ **Yes** _____ **No**

   If yes, please identify some examples._____

2. What resources (i.e., training, personnel, technology, etc.) does your department need to develop better methods for assessing student outcomes and improving program effectiveness?

3. Please list any additional comments or concerns.

Completed by:_____ **Date**:_____

INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS CHECKLIST

For Administrative and Academic Support Units

Unit: _____ **Campus:** _____

Part I. Does your unit have

1. A formal statement of purpose which supports FAU's mission and goals?
   _____ **Yes (please attach a copy)** _____ **No**

2. Explicit goals which support this unit's purpose?
   _____ **Yes** _____ **No**

3. Procedures to evaluate the extent to which goals are being achieved?
   _____ **Yes** _____ **No**

Part II. Evaluation Measures

During the past year, has your unit used any of the following for assessment of outcomes? Indicate "**A**" if currently being used; "**B**" if not currently being used but interested in using; and "**C**" if not applicable.

1____ Measures of volume of activity
Examples: *Number of clients served, circulation data, gross sales.*

Specify: _____

2____ Measures of efficiency
Examples: *Average turnaround time for filling requests, timely service/prompt response, budget information.*

Specify: _____

3____ Measures of service quality
Examples: *Error rates, accuracy of the information provided.*

Specify: _____

4____ Client satisfaction surveys
Examples: *Student satisfaction survey, alumni survey, employer survey, customer survey.*

Specify: _____

5____ Other methods to obtain client feedback
Examples: Focus groups, comments via email, evaluation forms, suggestion box, hotline.

Specify: _____

Part II. Evaluation Measures - *continued*

6. ____ Staff discussions/evaluations of services to clients

7. ____ Review of existing data
   Examples: *Departmental routine records/reports, institutional data, audits.*

   Specify:_____

8. ____ Standards/guidelines provided by professional associations such as SCUP, NACUBO

9. ____ Standards set by federal, state, county, city or FAU regulations

10. ____ External evaluators/auditors

11. ____ Benchmarks/Comparisons with peer institutions

12. ____ Other: _____

Part III. Other information

1. Have you used the results of any of the evaluation measures listed above to improve administrative and academic support services and operations? _____ **Yes** _____ **No**

   If so, please identify some examples.

2. What resources (i.e., training, personnel, technology, etc.) does your unit need to develop better methods for assess ing service outcomes and improving service quality and effectiveness?

3. Please list any additional comments or concerns.

Completed by: _____ **Date:** _____

Please return your completed form to:
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